

R E P O R T

FROM THE

SELECT COMMITTEE

ON THE

OPHTHALMIC HOSPITAL.

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*Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed,*  
*3 July 1821.*

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THE SELECT COMMITTEE appointed to inquire into the Establishment of the OPTHALMIC HOSPITAL in the Regent's Park, and the Claims of Sir WILLIAM ADAMS upon the Public;—HAVE inquired into the Matters referred to them, and have agreed to the following REPORT:—

WHATEVER may have been the origin of the Ophthalmia in this country, that disorder appears to have been greatly increased in its prevalence, and aggravated in its severity, in consequence of the infection communicated by our troops upon their return from Egypt; and in the years 1808 and 1809, while it appeared to be gaining ground among the general population of the country, its ravages in the army seem to have attracted the attention, and to have excited the alarms, of the military departments of the State.

Mr. Keate, the late Surgeon General, in a letter addressed to the Secretary at War, on the 8th of August 1808, says;

“ Having fully satisfied myself of the contagious nature of the Ophthalmia, I beg leave humbly to represent, That the evils already produced by the disease, and the much greater ones likely to ensue, deserve the immediate and most serious attention of His Royal Highness the Commander in Chief, and of yourself, to devise means not only for arresting its progress, but also, if possible, for exterminating it wholly from the Army. For until this be done, there can be no security against its being propagated so rapidly and extensively, as to endanger the public safety.”

He further states, “ That the number of soldiers who have been rendered totally blind by this affection, since its introduction in and from Egypt, exceeds at present one thousand.” And he adds, “ It is impossible not to entertain the most disquieting apprehensions respecting the future progress of the disorder.” And he concludes by stating, “ In such circumstances, it seems to me that no pains or expense likely to be requisite, for eradicating this contagion, should be regarded as too great for that purpose; and I beg leave humbly to suggest, for the determination of His Royal Highness and yourself, whether it might not be proper to refer the investigation of the best means of accomplishing this important object, to a Board specially appointed for that purpose, and which Board may consist of such members, besides the members of the Army Medical Board, as may be deemed competent by their attainments and experience, to so important an inquiry.”

In



In a subsequent letter, dated 29th August 1808, after making some further observations upon an instance of the extent to which the disorder was then spreading, he states ;

“ It will, I have no doubt, add great weight in the mind of His  
 “ Royal Highness and yourself, to the considerations which I had  
 “ the honour of submitting in my former letter, relative to the expe-  
 “ diency of finding means, if possible, for the complete extirpation  
 “ of the Ophthalmia.”

On the 28th October 1809, Dr. Vetch, then Staff Surgeon of the Ophthalmic Dépôt at Bognor (of whose knowledge and skill in the treatment of this complaint, the Committee are induced to think very highly, from the evidence which they have received in the course of this investigation,) addressed a letter to Mr. Knight, then Inspector General of Hospitals, in which there is the following passage :

“ I took occasion some time back to represent to you the alarming  
 “ progress which the Ophthalmia was then making in the Army ;  
 “ and I took the liberty of suggesting the necessity of adopting some  
 “ other and more powerful means of prevention.”

In the beginning of the year 1810 a Board was appointed, consisting of the three principal officers of the Army Medical Board, and of eight of the most distinguished civil practitioners in London ; and their Report, which contained some highly valuable suggestions, as to the most effectual means of preventing the disorder from spreading, by communication from infected persons ; and as to the best mode of treating it in its early and acute stages, was circulated in general orders, for the guidance and information of the medical officers of the army.

It does not appear, however, that this Report contained any instructions as to the mode of treating the chronic or third stage of the Ophthalmia ; nor did it direct the attention of those for whose guidance it was prepared, to the existence or treatment of those effects, which the acute inflammation, in the earlier stages of the disorder, generally produces upon the membrane that lines the inner surface of the eyelid.

In the beginning of 1810, and afterwards in 1812, Sir William Adams tendered to the military department, information as to the chronic or third stage of the disorder, and as to the mode of treating that stage, which he considered to be important, and at that time not generally known. In consequence of these communications from him, several out-pensioners of Chelsea, afflicted with blindness, were at different times placed under his care, as subjects for experiment, as to the importance and efficacy of the practice which he recommended ; and these communications and experiments ultimately led to the establishment of the Ophthalmic Hospital, at the head of which Sir William Adams was placed.

The objects of this Institution have been stated to Your Committee, to have been three :

*First*—To diffuse generally, among the surgeons of the army, the knowledge of the best mode of treating the chronic or third stage of the disorder.

*Secondly*—To diminish, if possible, the charge of the out-pensioners of Chelsea hospital, by curing or relieving men who had received pensions for defective sight.

*Thirdly*—To check, in some degree, the annual augmentation of the pension list, by treating men about to be discharged for defective sight, and by thus diminishing their claim to pension, as far as it might be founded upon the impaired state of their vision.

Yours



Your Committee are of opinion, That these objects were of sufficient importance to justify the steps which were taken for their attainment.

With respect to the first point, Your Committee have the satisfaction to find, That this, which was the most important object, has been greatly promoted. The Ophthalmia having, upon the return of our troops from Egypt, become, comparatively speaking, a new disease in this country; its proper treatment was, at first, imperfectly understood. It appears, however, that the attention of the Medical Department of the army, has, of late years, been most successfully directed to this subject; and that the best modes of treating all the different stages of the Ophthalmia, are now well understood, and practised in the army; and Your Committee are satisfied, that the establishment of the hospital, under Sir William Adams, has greatly contributed to promote this desirable object; not only by the direct opportunity it afforded of studying the various modes of practice, but indirectly, by the manner in which it appears to have excited the emulation and attention of other practitioners.

With respect to the second point, indeed it has been stated, that valid doubts were suggested, how far it was in the power of the Commissioners of Chelsea Hospital to take away or diminish any pension which they had granted, under the provisions of the Act of the 46th of Geo. 3d; and consequently, Your Committee have not thought it necessary to direct their inquiries to this point, as no diminution of pensions already granted could, under any circumstances, have been effected.

With respect to the third point, as but a few men, so circumstanced, have been placed in the hospital, it does not appear to Your Committee, that Sir William Adams has had sufficient opportunity of showing how far he could have effected this object, upon the scale originally proposed. But the general diffusion of knowledge among the medical officers of the army, must necessarily lead to the accomplishment of this end.

With regard to the future continuance of this Establishment, it has been stated to your Committee, by the Department with which it originated, that the main objects for which it was instituted, having thus been attained, it does not appear that any public inconvenience would now arise from its discontinuance. In this opinion your Committee are disposed to concur, and they therefore recommend that the Establishment should be discontinued, as soon as the proper arrangements can conveniently be effected.

Upon the claims of Sir William Adams upon the Public, your Committee have to report, that he has rested those claims upon two grounds:—

*First*—Upon his having been the means of promulgating to the Army, and to the Public, certain information as to the third or chronic stage of the Ophthalmia, and its consequences; namely, that it is the general, if not invariable effect of the inflammation, in the acute stage of the disorder, to produce, in a greater or less degree, what are termed granulations, on the inner surface of the eyelid; that these granulations render the patient subject to relapses, and are frequently the cause of blindness; that during the relapses so happening, the patient is liable to become again infectious; and therefore, that these granulations must invariably be looked for, and removed before the patient can be effectually cured.

*Secondly*—Upon his having attended the Ophthalmic Hospital since its first formation in 1817, without having hitherto received any remuneration for that duty.



Upon the first point, your Committee have to report, That the existence of these granulations, and the necessity of removing them, seems to have been known in very early times, and are adverted to in the works of Celsus, in the 1st century ; of Paulus, of Ægina, in the 7th ; of Rhasès, the Arabian, in the 10th ; and in the work of Sir William Reid, in the reign of Queen Anne ;—that consequently, no person in the present day can on this subject claim more than the merit of having revived knowledge, which had fallen into neglect. Your Committee do not feel it necessary to pronounce between the conflicting claims upon this head, or, by recommending a parliamentary reward for such revival, to decide to whom that merit properly belongs ; they conceive, that question is best left to the decision of the Profession and of the Public. But they are of opinion, that Sir William Adams has, among others, been greatly instrumental in promulgating this knowledge, and in rendering it generally available.

Upon the second point, Your Committee have to report, That since the first establishment of the Hospital, in 1817, Sir William Adams has devoted to the duties arising out of his appointment, a large portion of that time, which, to a professional man, is the source of income ; and that, inasmuch as the time which he could apply to his private practice has thereby been much curtailed, his professional emoluments must also have been proportionally lessened.

That he has performed the difficult duties of his appointment with the greatest zeal and assiduity ; and that Your Committee have been led to form the highest opinion of his skill and abilities as an oculist.

Your Committee, taking into consideration all the circumstances of the case, are induced to recommend, That the sum of Four Thousand Pounds should be paid to Sir William Adams, as a reward for the Services which he has rendered to the Public.

3 July 1821.

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